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ABSTRACT

In an eleventh-grade unit, students studied and practiced the art of storytelling and then went into elementary classrooms to tell stories to first-grade and second-grade children. Students prepared for the storytelling sessions by reading books on storytelling techniques, inviting a local storyteller to class and then videotaping and studying her presentation, and--with the aid of an elementary school librarian--choosing books to read to the children. The unit helped students to learn about elements of literature, as they examined children's books to choose those they would read, and it also helped to increase students' oral interpretation skills and composure before an audience. In addition, the unit established communication between the elementary and secondary schools and related to the home economics teacher's unit on child development and parenthood. (GW)

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STORYTELLING: ORAL INTERPRETATION IN THE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Once upon a time in a never-never land where behavioral objectives, accountability, and back to basics were never heard of, there lived a happy high school English teacher. His happiness stemmed from knowing something most of his other colleagues had overlooked.

When the English department chairman held meetings to discuss techniques for using oral interpretation and drama in the English classes, our happy hero laughed. His laughter was not appreciated by an all-too-serious chairman. It was certainly true that students did enjoy our hero's classes and one could hardly fault an English teacher who lived by the golden rule--"Do not give unto others that which works in your own classroom." But, alas and alack it was that quiet laughter that led to our hero's downfall and led also, my dear friends, to this truthful tale.

It happened on a day not unlike the worst Friday afternoon you have ever had. As the chairman made his attempt at creative dramatics, 25 seniors rode out the door on make-believe Hondas. Our hero grinned as his students left class speaking such phrases as "I can't wait 'till Thursday to share mine." "I love it. What a neat idea!" That final mischievous grin was the straw that broke

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the camel's back (but that's another tale). The chairman "roared his terrible roar and gnashed his terrible teeth" and demanded to know that magical spell our hero had cast over his excited class. He demanded that our hero break his golden rule and share his success. What follows is his reluctant testimony.

I began to consider teaching storytelling to my high school juniors way back when I heard my youngest boy ask for a particular babysitter because she told exciting stories that were even better than TV. I coupled that with your excellent push for oral interpretation in the English class (heroes don't get to be heroes without intelligence) and I hit on a unit in which students would study and practice the art of storytelling.

To make storytelling work, I knew the students needed an audience. A group peers would never work, at least not at first, until the students gained confidence. I reasoned that most of my students would eventually be parents and that led to securing three elementary school teachers who were willing to have my neophyte storytellers practice their craft on first and second graders. The teachers were anxious for the help and my students were ready to give it a try. All they asked was how to do it, what to tell, and what stories would children like.

These questions sent me on a quest for materials I could share with them on the age old art of storytelling. Soon students were reading Ruth Sawyer's The Way of the Storyteller, Marie Shedlock's The Art of the Storyteller, and Sara Cone Bryant's How to Tell Stories to Children. These books on technique led to a request on

the student's part to see a good storyteller in action. By all odds, the best weaver of tales in our community was a retired librarian. We invited her to class and videotaped her presentation. She told tales for children and tales about our town and its beginnings. The juniors listened spellbound while I filed an idea for our issue of Foxfire or its equivalent.

The best part of our storyteller's visit came when students began asking if the librarian had geared her presentation to high school students. What would she do differently in an elementary school? Would children react differently? My objectives of getting them to consider their audience was obviously achieved.

Now that interest was at a high pitch, students began to ask for suggestions of stories to share with their elementary school audience. Working with an enthusiastic elementary school librarian, we compiled a list of sure-fire hits. Children's story books were no longer handled as child's fare. Each book was enjoyed and evaluated as each student searched for the story that matched his personality. I couldn't have planned a better literature lesson as students looked for interesting style, cumulative tales, ingenious plots, and good characterization.

Stories selected included Stone Soup by Marcia Brown, Madeline by Ludwig Bemelmans, one of The Jack Tales by Richard Chase, several of the Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling, Caps for Sale by Esphyr Slobodkina, Millions of Cats by Wanda Gag, Crow Boy by Taro Yashima, and several of the tales written by Hans Christian Andersen.

As the students read and reread their stories, they worked on appropriate pitch, tone, and volume and compared their taped trials with recordings by storytellers Ruth Sawyer, Gudrun Thorne-Thomsen, and poet Dylan Thomas. All my ideas for lessons on oral interpretation and choral reading took a back seat to this student initiated interest. They considered everything I had hoped to cover from consideration of audience to specific ways an author turns a phrase.

Still for some of my students, facing an audience of 20 eager children was too much to handle, especially without any props. This led us in search of devices used by storytellers such as puppets and flannel boards. Our greatest resource for these devices became Charlotte Huck's book, Children's Literature in the Elementary School.

Tuesdays and Thursdays became high interest days as students came to class in the afternoon after sharing their stories in the mornings at the elementary school. The most confident students were videotaped and it seemed we all learned from critiquing the reruns. This Thursday my last junior shared his story. He returned with an envelope addressed to the class. Enclosed were 60 friendly thank you letters printed by an appreciative audience of first and second graders. The packet also contained a letter from the three elementary teachers in which they asked to continue the storytelling program. I thought I had better get your permission before I made this a semester happening.

I was going to say that the students did develop oral interpretation skills, all considered their audience, attention was paid to body movements, students gained composure and experience working

with youngsters, motivation was high, a good deal of literature was read and reread, articulation was established between the elementary and secondary schools, and the unit has a direct tie-in with the home economics teacher's unit on child development and parenthood.

So my friends, as our hero walked from the room, he left the bearded department chairman carefully considering what he had just heard. The final teacher dismissal bell rang and the chairman pondered storytelling as oral interpretation in the high school English class. It might even work in his own class he thought. Certainly, it could be no worse than the 25 seniors on make-believe Hondas.

As the chairman closed his briefcase, our hero re-entered the room. "The principal wants to see you," said our hero. "Something to do with letting the seniors out early to ride motorcycles."

Our hero grinned sheepishly as the chairman "roared his terrible roar and gnashed his terrible teeth." He swore he would make our hero confess yet another golden nugget. But that, my friends, is for another time.